

PHILEMON: A Brother Restored

by Ray C. Stedman

This little letter to Philemon is a marvelous example of the strongest force in the universe to affect control over someone -- grace. It takes up one of the most difficult problems we ever encounter, that of resolving quarrels between family members. We can ignore something a stranger does to hurt us, but it is very hard to forgive a member of our own family or someone close to us.

The key to this little letter is in the 16th verse. Paul says to Philemon that he is sending back Onesimus:

... no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {Phmn 1:16 RSV}

The background of this story is very interesting. This letter was written when the Apostle Paul was a prisoner in the city of Rome for the first time. It was sent to Philemon, a friend Paul had won to Christ, who lived in Colossae. Evidently Philemon had a young brother whose name was Onesimus.

Some way or another, we do not know how, Onesimus got into trouble -- maybe he was a gambling man -- and became the slave of his own brother, Philemon. In those days, if a man got into trouble, he could get somebody to redeem him by selling himself to that person as a slave. Perhaps Onesimus got into debt, and went to his brother, Philemon, and said, "Phil, would you mind going to bat here for me? I'm in trouble and I need some money."

Philemon would say, "Well, Onesimus, what can you give me for security?"

Onesimus would say, "I haven't got a thing but myself, but I'll become your slave if you'll pay off this debt." Now that may or may not have been how it occurred, but the picture we get from this little letter is that Philemon is the brother of Onesimus, and his slave as well.

Sometime before this letter was written, Onesimus had run away. In the Roman Empire, if a slave ran away from his master, he could either be put to death or shipped back to his master. Before he left, Onesimus had apparently stolen some money from Philemon. He found his way to the city of Rome, and there he somehow came into contact with the Apostle Paul in prison, and was reached with the gospel (like so many runaway boys, he came under the sound of the Word of God and was soundly converted), and became Paul's helper there in the city of Rome. But Paul was determined to send him back to Philemon, so he wrote this gracious little note and sent it back in the hand of Onesimus himself.

Imagine the scene at the home of Philemon when this letter arrives. Philemon is standing out on his porch one morning, looking down the road, and he sees somebody coming. He says to his wife, "Dear, here comes someone to see us." As he watches, he thinks he sees who it is, and he says, "You know, dear, I hope I'm wrong, but that looks like my rascally brother coming home again." Sure enough, as Onesimus gets closer and closer, Philemon sees that it is indeed his brother who had run away and disgraced the family -- the black sheep coming back again. There is a dark cloud on his brow as he goes to meet Onesimus. He throws up his hands and says, "Well, so you've come home at last, have you? What brings you back this time? A bad penny always returns, they say."

Onesimus does not say a word. He knows there is no use trying to defend himself. He just hands him this letter from the Apostle Paul, and Philemon opens the letter that was in scroll form and begins to read:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker ... {Phmn 1:1 RSV}

Philemon says, "Yes, this is from Paul all right. That's the way he always begins his letters." Then he continues:

and Apphia our sister [that's Mrs. Philemon] and Archippus our fellow soldier, ... {Phmn 1:2a RSV}

We do not know who he was, but it is likely that he was the son of Philemon and Apphia.

... and the church in your house. {Phmn 1:2b RSV}

Isn't that an interesting little sidelight? People gathered together in Philemon's home to study and pray together. This is the "church" that Paul greets. Then we have this salutation that is so familiar:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {Phmn 1:3 RSV}

Philemon says to his wife, "I don't know how this fellow got this letter, but it is from Paul." So he goes on reading:

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, {Phmn 1:4-5 RSV}

Philemon says, "Listen to that, dear. Old Paul has been praying for us, even from prison. Isn't that wonderful! To think that he is remembering us in prayer over here in Colossae. I wonder what he's praying about?"

... and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ. {Phmn 1:6 RSV}

Philemon says to his wife, "I wonder what he means by 'the sharing of your faith'; I don't quite get what he means." He reads some more:

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. {Phmn 1:7 RSV}

He says, "My, isn't that a nice thing for Paul to say. He says he has been refreshed by us, but how many times have we been refreshed by him?" Philemon goes on reading the letter:

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required. {Phmn 1:8 RSV}

Paul is saying, "I could order you to do this. I could be legal about this. I have the authority as an apostle." Philemon would probably do it, but there would be rebellion inside. But Paul is not going to do that; he goes on:

... yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you -- {Phmn 1:9a RSV}

Notice how he changed the expression here? "I appeal to you." On what basis is he going to appeal?

I, Paul, an ambassador [that ought to appeal to him] and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus -- {Phmn 1:9b RSV}

I think the tears probably came to Philemon's eyes as he read this. Dear old Paul, who had led him to Christ, sitting in that lonely prison writing this letter and saying, "Philemon, old friend, would you do me a favor? I'm appealing to you, even though I could command you. I'd like you to do me this special favor." You can just hear Philemon's heart softening as he reads these words. Now he says:

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. {Phmn 1:10 RSV}

Startled, Philemon turns to his wife and says, "Dear, do you think Paul has actually led this fellow to Christ? He talks as though he were his spiritual father!" He reads on:

(Formerly he was useless to you [I'll say he was -- stealing everything I had and running off like that.], but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) {Phmn 1:11 RSV}

This is a little pun on the name Onesimus; the name means useful, or profitable. Paul is an eminent humorist, and is not at all ashamed to make a pun in the right place. With a twinkle in his eye, he says, "Onesimus may have been useless to you once, but he is useful now. He is Onesimus now."

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. {Phmn 1:12 RSV}

Philemon says, "I don't understand it. Why on earth does Paul want to send him back to me? After all this fellow has done, even though he has become a Christian, it's going to be awfully hard for me to forget how he has disgraced my name here in the community." But Paul writes:

I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, {Phmn 1:13 RSV}

That must have touched Philemon's heart. Surely he longed to be able to do something for Paul. Paul tells him how, "Onesimus did it in your behalf; he served me." And then he says,

but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. {Phmn 1:14 RSV}

Now that is the very heart of grace, isn't it? It does not force anybody to do anything. Paul says here in Philemon, "I don't want you to accept him back simply because I said so. And I certainly didn't want to keep him in Rome without your consent, so I'm sending him back to you."

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {Phmn 1:15-16 RSV}

Philemon's heart is beginning now to turn towards this black sheep brother of his. He says to his wife, "If Paul found Onesimus so dear to him, maybe we ought to find some way to forgive him for all the things he has done. Maybe the fellow has been changed. Let's see what else Paul has to say."

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. {Phmn 1:17 RSV}

"Well," says Philemon, "this puts quite a different slant on things. I was going to take him back, as long as Paul had sent him like this, but I would have sent him back down to live with the rest of the slaves in the slave quarters. But now Paul says that we are to receive him as we would receive Paul himself!"

Apphia says, "Well, we surely would never send Paul down to the slave house; we'd give him the very best guest room in the house. So if we are going to receive Onesimus as we would receive Paul, we'd better give him the best room."

So Philemon says, "All right, dear, go get the guest room ready. We'll bring him in there. But wait a minute! He never paid back the money he took. We've got to get that from him."

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. {Phmn 1:18 RSV}

Isn't that wonderful? That is grace. You have the doctrine of acceptance and the doctrine of substitution wonderfully portrayed here in this little letter. God receives us in the person of another; we were like

Onesimus. In fact, Martin Luther said, "All of us were God's Onesimus." We are slaves. We merit nothing. We have done things that are wrong. We stand before a God who is righteous and holy, and yet the Lord Jesus says, "If he has done anything wrong, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will pay it." That is what Paul says here.

I, Paul write this with my own hand, I will repay it -- to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. {Phmn 1:19-20 RSV}

Now I am sure that it happened that way. I think that Philemon was touched by this wonderful word of grace from the apostle, as he thought of that dear man sitting in the loneliness of his prison writing this letter. He had nothing of himself. He had no money, nothing with which to repay, and yet he wrote, "If he owes you anything, don't worry about it. I'll pay it myself when I come."

I think that was the crowning touch. Philemon's heart just broke and he probably opened his arms to Onesimus and they forgave one another. As they wept on one another's shoulders, the fellowship of the family was restored once again.

Then see what Paul writes at the end:

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. {Phmn 1:21 RSV}

Do you see how far grace carries this matter? If Paul had been writing this on a legal basis, he would have said: "Philemon! As the Holy Apostle of the Holy Church, I command you to receive back this young man and to give him back his job!" That is as far as law could go. And Philemon would probably have had to obey it, or else get into trouble with the church. But grace goes much farther. It not only has restored Onesimus to his place in the household, but it has restored him to his place in the family as well. It breaks down all the barriers, smoothes out all the friction that has developed, and creates a better situation than ever existed before.

Now Paul closes with some personal references:

At the same time, prepare the guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you. {Phmn 1:22 RSV}

Here we see that the apostle says he is expecting to be released -- but how? "Through your prayers." He says, "You keep praying for me there in Colossae." And we know that God did grant these requests. Paul was released, and he preached the word of God for several years before he was incarcerated for the second time.

Finally, he sends along greetings from some of those who were with him. Epaphras was well known in Colossae; he had founded the church there. But now, as a fellow prisoner with Paul in Rome, he sends greetings. So does Mark, the author of the gospel of Mark, and Aristarchus, one of Paul's disciples. Demas was the young man who forsook Paul, having loved "this present world," {2 Tim 4:10b RSV}. And Luke, also with Paul in Rome, sends greetings to Philemon as well.

Then we have this closing word, which is characteristic of letters written by Paul:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. {Phmn 1:25 RSV}

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